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ABSTRACT

Schema theories have proposed that comprehension results from the activation of generalized knowledge structures, called schemata, stored in memory. These schemata represent abstract conceptual models of reality that children construct in their minds on the basis of their experience in the world. Unfortunately the comprehension of literature places some rather special demands on the child. The world of literature is an imaginary place--the imaginative creation of the writer--and one where anything can happen and often does. In literature, imagination overturns reality and imposes a new reality which is instantiated through the language of literature. New schemata must be developed, new predictions made, and new hypotheses tested to accommodate the new realities encountered. From the interaction of the children's receptivity to the world of the imagination and the author's portrayal of this world, comprehension results. In this sense, children recreate the literature they read on the basis of the imaginative capacity they bring to reading. In schools educators must ensure that they do nothing to diminish this capacity. It is necessary for children to enter and inhabit the fanciful worlds of their literature, and to explore and delight in the inner complexity and imaginative potential of these worlds. (HOD)

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TEACHING THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

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One of the debts North American language arts education owes to Europe is the recognition that no one part of the language arts curriculum can be considered in isolation from the others. Despite past attempts to treat the language arts curriculum as though it were made up of separate units, there has been a growing recognition in North America that children's language learning does not proceed according to "logical" divisions. Rather, this learning is now seen to proceed according to a highly integrated process involving all the language arts, reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This realization has emerged in the work of such European educators as James Britton (Barnes, Britton, Rosen and L.A.T.E., 1969; Britton, 1970) and his colleagues in England, and has influenced and been expressed in North America by such writers as James Moffett (Moffett 1968; Moffett and Wagner 1976).

An important outcome of this integrated approach to the language arts has been a reassessment of literature in the language arts

curriculum. No longer is literature viewed as a "treat"--something children get to read only after they have completed required basal reading assignment and the accompanying workbook exercises. Rather, children's literature is coming to be recognized as a highly important integral part of the language arts curriculum capable of providing children with not only a richness of literary experience, but also an important basis for their reading, writing, speaking, and listening development as well. Reading need not be taught through "the reading program," that carefully delineated skills progression without benefit of which no pupil is supposed to be able to learn to read. Reading can be learned by children reading the literature which enchants and excites them, and this reading can provide the basis for what children write about, speak about, and listen to others speak about as well. Seen in this light, literature provides one of the main stays of an integrated language arts curriculum by providing a myriad of opportunities for that integration to take place in the classroom.

Literature and Reading

The relationship between literature and reading is a particularly strong one for the obvious reason that to be enjoyed, literature must be read and it must be comprehended. This raises the question of how literature is comprehended, and, for teaching, the additional question of how literature can be taught so as to further children's comprehension of it.

Broaching the question of how literature is comprehended plunges

one immediately into a welter of controversy, folklore, and theory. The quick answer to the question is that nobody knows exactly how children comprehend what they read. However, the past fifteen years have witnessed substantial progress in coming to at least some partially substantiated understandings of the nature of reading comprehension. These understandings help to show how children comprehend what they read, and how they can be taught to comprehend what they read to provide them with a basis for their enjoyment of literature.

It is only in the past few years that North American psychology has thrown off the prevailing influence of behaviorism. The significance of behaviorism for reading instruction is that it gave rise to basal readers and most other formal reading programs currently used in schools. The fundamental tenet of behaviorism is that the world is knowable only to the extent that it is observable. Thus all human behavior can be accounted for by an equation between a stimulus and a response, the S-R paradigm of the behavioral psychologist. In reading instruction, the stimulus is the question (for example, "What is the main idea of this paragraph?"), and the response is the answer. If the correct answer is given, then learning has occurred--somehow. It is not a question to be considered how learning takes place; it is enough to observe that it has by witnessing the child give the correct answer.

It can be seen how basal readers and other reading programs emphasizing a formal sequence of skills development emerged in a climate of behaviorism. Reading, it was argued, could be broken down into its

parts--the skills required for its achievement. These parts could then be sequenced and taught (stimulated) by asking pupils questions which provoked the answers (responses) which demanded the observable demonstration of the skills. These demonstrations of behaviorally defined learning outcomes included the usual array of word attack skills and comprehension skills. When pupils could perform these skills--often in isolation from continuous prose passages--they had learned to "read."

However, many teachers found that children could perform the individual skills prescribed by reading programs, but that they did not seem to have learned to read in the sense that they could comprehend what they read. The skills demanded of children did not equate with the acquisition of a rich and thorough understanding. To the intuitive beliefs of these teachers that the skills approach was somehow in error was added in 1967 the support of a seminal article by Kenneth Goodman (1967) followed in 1971 by a revolutionary analysis of the reading process by Frank Smith (1971).

Both of these authors challenged the prevailing application of behaviorist psychology to reading instruction. In an article following his initial one, Goodman (1969) argued that during reading the reader is "a user of language [who] interacts with the graphic input as he seeks to reconstruct the message encoded by the writer" (p.15). Similarly, Smith (1971) characterized the reader as being actively engaged in a process of hypothesis testing. The reader predicts the meaning he will find in the text before him on the basis of expectations he

has developed through his life experience. If these expectations are confirmed, comprehension results; if they are not confirmed, either the reader remains confused or he develops a new hypothesis and reads to confirm or reject it.

In both of these writers' work, one finds an emphasis on the information the reader brings to the reading act as well as the information the reader finds in the text before him. Comprehension is seen to result not from the mechanical application of a set of observable predetermined reading skills, but rather from a cognitive process involving a constant interaction between the reader and the text, what Goodman (1967) calls the psycholinguistic guessing game. During this process, the reader employs both what Smith (1975, p.50) calls the nonvisual information he brings to the reading act (the information he has derived from his life experience and upon which he bases his expectations concerning the meaning he will find on the page before him), and the visual information he finds represented by the print on the page. In reading, this nonvisual information is as important if not more important than the visual information.

Like the theories of Goodman and Smith, more recent theories of the reading process also emphasize cognition and the importance of the information the reader brings to the reading act. These theories are based on what is called "schema theory" and have been explored and articulated mainly through the work of Richard C. Anderson (Anderson 1977; 1978) and his colleagues at the University of Illinois, and by

David Rumelhart (Rumelhart 1980; Rumelhart and Otony 1977) at the University of California at San Diego. Borrowing the term "schema" from the British psychologist, Sir Frederick Bartlett (1932), these theories have proposed that comprehension results from the activation of generalized knowledge structures called "schemata" stored in memory. These schemata represent abstract conceptual models of reality which children construct in their minds on the basis of their experience in the world. For example, through their life experience, children develop an abstract generic conceptualization of "dog" which forms a schema in their memory. This schema would not only represent all the dogs--poodles, pointers, large dogs, small dogs, happy dogs, unhappy dogs--but it would also structure this knowledge by providing such information as dogs bark, chase cats, dig holes, and are capable of being man's best friend. Besides providing this elaborative knowledge about dogs, however, the dog schema also constrains what can be associated with dogs. For instance, dogs do not go to work in the morning, they do not climb trees, and they cannot be expected to carry on polite conversation with house guests.

In all of this the pervasive influence of expectation and inference can be seen. The schemata--the knowledge structures children build in their minds--result from what they have learned to expect from their experience in the world. When children encounter an object, event, or situation, according to schema theory, their method for comprehending this is to try to accommodate the new experience within existing schemata in their memory. Upon first encountering Fido, for

example, a child will try to match Fido to his existing "dog" schema. If Fido behaves in the way the child's dog schema says he will (for example, Fido wags his tail, jumps up even when told not to, and generally behaves in a dog-like fashion), a match between Fido and the child's existing dog schema takes place, Fido is comprehended as being a dog, and is accommodated within the child's existing model of reality. If, however, Fido extends his right forepaw in a genteel manner and wishes the child good morning, either the child becomes totally confused and no comprehension takes place, or the child revises his dog schema or builds a new schema which accommodates this unexpected turn of events and comprehension results.

Reading Literature

Unfortunately (and forunately), the comprehension of literature places some rather special demands on the child. In order to gain an understanding of what those demands are, it is necessary to consider what literature is, and also to consider the special nature of literary language and what this language represents.

The first thing to realize is that children's literature is not generically different from adult literature. In some quarters, there prevails the notion that children's literature is some diluted form of adult literature, sentimental, palatable, free from any real conflict, and generally digestible without upset. This describes bad literature--both children's and adult--and not the literature we want children to read. Good children's literature is in the first instance good

literature: that it is intended for children follows this, it does not precede it.

All this begs the question, "What is literature?". This question has occupied the attention of literary critics since Aristotle, and certainly will not be settled here. However, valuable insight into the nature of literature is provided by the American critics Rene Wellek and Austin Warren (1956). They describe a literary work as "a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships" (p.27). If one accepts the premise that children's literature is literature in its own right, exhibiting the characteristics of good literature irrespective of its intended audience, children or adults, then the reading task confronting the child seeking to comprehend literature becomes more understandable when considered in terms of Wellek and Warren's description of a literary work.

The key element in literature, according to Wellek and Warren, is its organizational complexity and ideational density. Considering this in terms of schema theory, a literary work is organizationally complex since it exhibits the schemata (knowledge structures) of its creator. In this way, a literary work illustrates not only the final outcome of the creative process, but the creative process itself (Harker 1978). A work of literature is the expression of a conceptual model of reality held in the mind of the writer. It exhibits the complexity of this reality as well as its multiplicity of possible meanings. In this vein, the American poet Wallace Stevens (1951) describes a writer as

one who "has had to do with whatever the imagination and the senses have made of the world" (p.30).

But the world of literature is not the world of reality, at least not the reality experienced and expected in everyday life. If there is one defining characteristic of literature as opposed to other writing it is that the realities portrayed in literature are ones existing on other planes of experience than ordinary events. The conceptual models which writers express through their works are not those obtainable from normal experience. They are, as Stevens says, based on whatever the imagination has made of normal experience. This process of "making" (and remember that Aristotle described the poet as a "maker") has been described by C. S. Lewis (1952) in this way:

> I see pictures. Some of these pictures have a common flavour, almost a common smell, which groups them together. Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining thmselves up. If you were very lucky (I have never been as lucky as all that), a whole set might join themselves so consistently that there you had a complete story without doing anything yourself. (p.13)

And the result of this process has been described by Tolkien (1964) as follows:

> What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates

> is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. (p.114)

It is this imaginative power which is the creative force of literature and which sets literature apart from other forms of language expression.

But what of the language of literature? If literature can be described as the linguistic representation of imaginary worlds, how does the language by which these worlds are portrayed differ from the language used to describe the normal world of everyday life. The most obvious example of the creative shift in literary language expression is in poetry. Here normal language becomes altered, not simply for the sake of alteration (except in the case of doggerel), but because the realities poets express are not communicable through normal language. The deviant linguistic structures of poetry are not there for the sake of difficulty or even convention. They are there because, to express the reality represented in the world of the poem, the poet must alter language from its standard form to other forms. The language of poetry is not the language of everyday life because the world of a poem is not the world of everyday life.

What is true of the language of poetry is also true, although to a lesser extent, of the language of literary prose. The conventions of

literary prose style are stricter than those of poetry, and for this reason the linguistic deviance of poetry is mitigated in creative prose. However, the syntax of literature is not the syntax of ordinary life because if it were the imaginitive element would be lost. No matter how realistic literary prose appears to be, the reality it conveys is one created in the imagination of its author. Therefore even in prose the unusual cannot be unexpected.

It is in this lack of conventional expectation that the essence of literary experience resides. If reading comprehension is conceived as a hypothesis testing enterprise, one wherein the reader seeks accommodation between the knowledge structures (schemata) he brings to reading based on his life experience in the real world, and the clues to meaning he finds in the imaginary worlds depicted in the material before him, then reading literature imposes somewhat different demands from other material while at the same time it provides opportunities for unexpected delight.

The world of literature is not a "normal" place. It is an imaginary place, the imaginative creation of the writer, and one where anything can happen and often does. Helen Lourie (1962) has described this world of unqualified expectation in this way:

> In this world trunks fly, swineherds marry princesses, Jumblies go to sea in a sieve; a child is adopted by the North Wind, white rabbits carry watches in their waistcoat pockets, little boys can remain fluttering

> for ever between infancy and maturity, between the nursery ceiling and the wooded island in the middle of the Serpentine lake. In this world, immortality, Pobbles with or without toes, levitation, need no explanations--nor do ambition, ruthlessness, love, hate, or death. It is a world without rules, physical or moral. (p.8)

In literature, imagination overturns reality and imposes a new reality which is instantiated through the language of literature. The expectations of normalcy are overturned and new expectations are imposed. New schemata must be developed, new predictions made, and new hypotheses tested to accommodate the new realities encountered.

Literature and the Child

It is a moot point whether the unexpected in literature imposes additional burdens on children's comprehension, or whether the nature of childhood provides children with a unique capacity to comprehend and enjoy literature unburdened by its deviance from the normal world. On the one hand, it can be argued that children's life experience has placed in their memories a set of schemata which are incompatible with the experiences and events portrayed in literature, and therefore the comprehension of literature is doubly difficult. On the other hand, it can be argued that by virtue of children's limited experience in the world, their knowledge structures are more flexible than are those of adults and therefore their ability to comprehend the unexpected as

experienced through literature is superior to adults.

Anyone familiar with children and children at play must side with the second of these two arguments. It is one of the joys of childhood that the boundary between reality and fancy is not a clearly demarcated one. As Bruno Bettelheim (1977) has remarked, "a child trusts what the fairy story tells, because its world view accords with his own" (p.45). The world of the child is one where fantasy and imagination are able to exist on the same footing as reality and the concrete. Children evidence little sense of incompatibility between the creative worlds of their own imaginations and the imaginations of the authors whose stories they read, and the conventional worlds in which they live. This is not to say that they do not know the difference. They do, but to them this difference does not seem to matter as much as it does for most adults. Children have not wholly learned the laws of convention, the predictability of grown-up affairs, and the encroaching set of expectations which govern the adult world. They still exist in a world of relative freedom, not "trailing clouds of glory," perhaps, but seemingly not entirely out of touch with the transcendental either. For children, fantasy and reality are as often at one as they are not.

But children grow up and in the process of doing so they attend school. This raises the question of what happens in schools. The situation of the child in the school environment is not that he needs to be taught to be receptive to the imaginative quality of literature--he already possesses this receptivity by virtue of being a child to a

much greater degree than does his teacher. Rather, the school environment must be one which protects the child against the erosion of his receptivity to the imaginative quality of literature. He needs to be educated in an environment which, while encouraging his development toward mature adulthood, does not in the process of doing so rob him of his sense of wonder. As the child grows up, the intrusion of the expectations of an increasingly immanent adulthood threatens to restrict his conceptual world so as not to permit an uninhibited delight in the imagination and fancy of literature.

How then is a child's comprehension of literature to be furthered while not making the process of comprehension one which reduces his delight in literature? The fundamental implication which can be drawn from recent theories of the reading process is that children will learn to read literature by being immersed in literature. It is only through the experience of reading large amounts of literature that children's comprehension of literature at its imaginative level can be furthered. As has been seen, comprehension results from an interaction between the reader and the text. What children bring to the text is a native capacity of receive and accept what in the normal world of adult convention is considered to be unreal. What children find in literature is a representation of a separate reality, one born of the author's imagination.

From the interaction of these two elements--the children's receptivity to the world of the imagination and the author's portrayal of this world--comprehension results. The meaning to be comprehended is

not something to be laboriously extracted from the text; it is something which results from a creative interaction between the reader and the text, a process analogous to the author's original creation. In this sense, each child recreates the literature he reads on the basis of the imaginative capacity he brings to reading. In schools we must ensure that we do nothing to diminish this capacity. It is necessary for children to enter and inhabit the fanciful worlds of their literature, and to explore and delight in the inner complexity and imaginative potential of these worlds. In this way, children will comprehend and find joy in their literature, not from the outside in, but from the inside out.

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